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To cite this article: Andrew Smith (2016) The window and the wardrobe: C.L.R. James and the critical reading of sport and literature, Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 52:3, 262-273, DOI: [10.1080/17449855.2016.1203100](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2016.1203100)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2016.1203100>



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Published online: 20 Jul 2016.



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The window and the wardrobe: C.L.R. James and the critical reading of sport and literature

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the materialist reading of culture developed by C.L.R. James. Central to James's approach was his refusal to respect the implicit segregation between "high" and "low" or "intellectual" and "popular" forms of culture. In important respects, the article argues, it is precisely because James begins from an analysis of the practices and audiences of popular sport that his approach to the analysis of literature is as valuable as it is. In particular, the article emphasizes three lessons which James appears to derive from his willingness to think carefully about the political and sociological meanings of sporting practice: first, his attention to the embodied and time-bound nature of cultural reception; second, his consistent rejection of a "determinist" reading of culture; third, his insistence on the necessity of continuing to make evaluative judgements with regard to cultural creativity.

KEYWORDS

C.L.R. James; *Beyond a Boundary*; cricket; sport; literature; popular culture; reception

Looking back, looking beyond

In the famous opening of *Beyond a Boundary*, his study of the politics of sport in the context of empire, C.L.R. James recalls how, as a young boy growing up in Trinidad, he would watch through the bedroom window of the family house in the small town of Tunapuna the local cricket team practising and playing: "an umpire could have stood at that bedroom window" ([1963] 1983, 13), he remembers. From the same chair in front of the window, moreover, he could "mount on to the window-sill and so stretch a groping hand for the books on top of the wardrobe". Thus early on, James notes, between the popular sporting practice in front of him, and immersion in the literature beloved of his mother, "the pattern of my life was set" (13).

James nowhere uses the kind of technical language beloved of Pierre Bourdieu ([1986] 2000), but nevertheless what he draws attention to in this opening autobiographical reflection is exactly what the latter refers to as the formation of a "habitus", for which a straightforward description might indeed be "the patterning of a life". That is to say, the way in which our upbringings and social backgrounds leave their marks on our tastes and inclinations,

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establishing that sociological patterning of our selves which is expressed through our apparently subjective choices, our seemingly instinctive pleasures and disgusts. In telling the stories of ourselves, Bourdieu notes, we frequently fall prey to the “biographical illusion” (298). By this Bourdieu means the assumption that our lives necessarily entail a “logical order”, and that their narration therefore involves the disclosure of that order, such that biography is understood to be composed of a series of “intelligible relationships” between events which are “turned into *steps* of a necessary development” (298, emphasis in original). In life stories so told, circumstantial facts are read as evidence of intentionality, and socially contingent possibilities appear, ultimately, to demonstrate the subject’s own foreknowledge or destiny. This mode of self-understanding, according to Bourdieu, is rehearsed in a range of literary forms, and is consonant with the “official model of the self” (301) in which each of us appears as a solitary and unique individual, the bearer of legal rights and the subject of various kinds of bureaucratic recording and accounting. What such a view conceals, for Bourdieu, is the profoundly social and contextual nature of our identities, the extent to which our selfhood emerges only through our entailment in relations, practices and historical arrangements by which we come to conceive of ourselves and in respect of which our actions are accorded meaning and purpose:

Trying to understand a life as a unique and self-sufficient series of successive events [...] without ties other than the association to a ‘subject’ [...] is nearly as absurd as trying to make sense out of a subway route without taking into account the network structure, that is the matrix of objective relations between different stations. (302).

James jokes, about the idea that the circumstances of his early life make a “good case [...] for predestination, including the position of the house in front of the recreation ground and the window exactly behind the wicket” ([1963] 1983, 17). But the joke is a knowing one, a gesture towards his family’s Puritan beliefs. In fact, it seems to me, what James is engaged in, in *Beyond a Boundary*, is not another version of the biographical illusion but something much more self-aware. We might think of it as a form of auto-ethnography, an attempt to work through – or to look through – the “patterns” of his own life in pursuit of a better understanding of the “patterns” of history. He makes this quite clear, insisting that the “connected pattern” within which he places those “isolated memories” of his early life is not something preordained, but rather something which he is seeking, purposively, to construct or to explicate. Thus, he insists, his younger self is remembered not as a magical point of *origin*, but rather as the “the end” point from which he is able to discern a “pyramid” embracing “social relations, politics and art [...] a frame of reference that stretches east and west into the receding distance, back into the past and forward into the future” (17). In short, James tells the story of himself so as to better grasp that history and those “social relations”; he seeks to reread the social through the self in much the way that Bourdieu would later propose.

In doing this, of course, James is concerned to dispute the proforma shape of the “official self” of bourgeois individualism. As many grateful readers have recognized, it is wholly characteristic of James’s work that he restlessly pursues connections and correspondences between aspects of experience which capitalist society treats as incommensurable. Nothing was more “Jamesian”, in this respect, than to seek out the interrelations in those aspects of human experience which had been torn in half by colonial racism (as, for example, in his pioneering history of the transatlantic currents of revolutionary belief and practice that led to the overthrow of imperial rule in Haiti), or which fell victim to the “complete

divorce and absolute disharmony between mental and intellectual labor” (James, Lee, and Dunayevskaya 1986, 115) that capitalism establishes. In other words, part of what James seeks, as he looks over the shoulder of his own younger self, is a pattern that will reveal just how amputated and partial is the view of the world which is shaped by that “categorization and specialization, that division of the human personality, which is the greatest curse of our time” ([1963] 1983, 191). In this respect James’s vision is directed always towards the “human” as something whole: “Man has to become a total, complete being, participating in all aspects and phases of modern existence, or the modern world [will] crush his divided personality” ([1953] 1985, 93).

Here, for all the noteworthy similarities between their social theories, he is different from – and more hopeful than – Bourdieu. One cannot imagine James describing the person, as Bourdieu does, as a “collection of positions simultaneously occupied at a given moment of time by a biological individual socially instituted, acting as a support to a collection of attributes suitable for allowing him to intervene as an efficient agent in different fields” ([1986] 2000, 302). Such a description leads one to ask whether Bourdieu’s theory does not itself take its blueprint rather too readily from the scars left by that same fragmentation of human experience. At the heart of James’s politics, in any case, was a normative rejection of this condition. Looking back at his younger self is thus actually a means of looking beyond, of summoning up what might be. Gazing over the field of popular sport before him, and reaching for the texts of high culture beside him, he demonstrates the possibility of something more than just “efficient agency” in the discrete fields of culture. Rather, determined to think and act across those fields he sought to deny the “distinctions” upon which they rest, and to deny thereby their hold over human possibility. In this respect, as elsewhere – and not unlike W.E.B. Du Bois – James insisted that it is often those men and women from social contexts deemed “backward” or “peripheral” who best recognize, and might most effectively subvert, the constitutive boundaries of the modern social order.

Selma James (2013) has reported recently that the publisher’s decision to change the title of James’s book from *Beyond the Boundary* to *Beyond a Boundary* came as a disappointment to her and to James himself: “‘The’ challenges boundaries generally”, she noted, “not just cricket’s” (n.p.). Certainly, as suggested, James was concerned to challenge boundaries in general. Yet if there is “a” single boundary which is at issue in this book it is that line of intellectual apartheid which is drawn between popular and high culture, the very distinction which he recalls his own younger self blithely ignoring as he looked from the sporting play to the literary text and back again. The effects of this division are pervasive, James notes. He points out, for example, that even those writers who were willing to acknowledge the aesthetic or expressive qualities of popular sport, such as Neville Cardus, took for granted the priority of elite over non-elite forms of creativity: “Neville Cardus, the writer on cricket, often introduces music into his cricket writing. Never once has Neville Cardus, the music critic, introduced cricket into his writing on music” ([1963] 1983, 191).

On this point, there is thus a stark difference between James’s account of what he, tellingly, called “the popular arts”, and the broadly contemporaneous accounts of the “culture industry” provided by Theodor Adorno and others (see, for discussion, Alleyne 1999; Larsen 1996; Smith 2010, 77–80). Those differences extend in too many directions to be fully explored here but they are rooted, at least in part, in the fact that James’s approach was deeply informed by his awareness of the fact that resistance to enslavement and to empire often found its modality, its means of expression, in the otherwise denigrated practices of popular

creativity amongst colonized peoples. Knowing this history as he did, James absolutely refused to accede to a view of popular culture that treated it as nothing more than a mode of training in political submission and the demands of social order. Moreover, James denies the corresponding claim – also à la Adorno – that the exclusivity of elite culture represents our last, desperate intellectual bulwark against the depredations of mass society. In James's case, that denial was expressed not just as a theoretical refusal of Frankfurt School elitism, but also in his interpretative practice which involved a deliberately disruptive “thinking across” the boundary from “low” to “high”. The lessons of that practice are what I am concerned with in this article: in what ways is James able to extend our critical thinking about literature precisely *because* he was happy for his reading of the literary text to be informed by his immersion in the world of popular sporting practices, because he reads literature *through* sport, as it were, rather than the other way around?

Bodies and crowds

The first thing that we might recognize – and here again James prefigures Bourdieu in important respects – is that James's focus on sport, and on cricket in particular, means that he is consistently attentive to the fact that bodily and affective experiences are central to how we consume culture. Characteristically, then, what he describes in recalling his younger self is how he learned, by watching the game through the window, and by watching also the responses of the local audience gathered around the boundary edge, to experience a visceral and deeply involving pleasure in the play: the sense of “recognition and delight” (James [1963] 1983, 14) at the shot-making of Matthew Bondman as it was acclaimed by the crowd; the promissory excitement in the anticipation of Arthur Jones's famous square-cut – “The crowd was waiting for it, I at my window was waiting” (15). Tellingly, however, he uses just the same language to describe his response to the literary texts for which he first started to grope above the wardrobe as a 6-year-old. If his younger self “thrilled” at some particular play of Bondman's, it found no less “thrilling” (15) the writings of Burke and Shelley that he came to “idolize” at school, or that famous passage from *Vanity Fair* in which George is killed at Waterloo, and which a fascinated James “used to read and re-read and repeat” (47). James establishes a quite deliberate parallel here, it seems to me, between the “violent shock” that he felt on encountering Thackeray's sudden overturning of the formal conventions of the heroic romance and his earlier memory of the moment when Arthur Jones is caught on the boundary, undone by that very shot which had won for him his own local status as a hero. In both cases James recalls the same sudden peripeteia – “the usual shout, a sudden silence” (16) – with which the presumed hero is removed from the stage before the story is complete. James thus takes seriously the role of “tactile consciousness” (202), as he later describes it, in our response to artistic practices of all kinds, including those forms, such as literature, for which the conventional model of consumption has historically been one of solitude and inward contemplation; a matter of the mind, not of the body or the emotions.

In *Notes on Dialectics*, his witty and discursive primer on Hegel, written for comrades in America in the 1940s, James had particularly emphasized the dangers of reifying the categories of “understanding”. Hegel teaches us the importance, he suggests, of paying continual attention not just to the historical qualities of that to which we are responding, but also to the historicity of our own interpretative labour, of how we make meaning: “Scientific method is the examination of an object in its changes and the examination of our concepts of that

object, watching how *both* change, doing it consciously, clearly” (James [1948] 1980a, 55; emphasis in original). In this respect, it is significant, that James’s emphasis on the role of tactile consciousness implies a response to sporting practice as a happening, as an event “in time” even if that time is momentary, as in the example of watching Arthur Jones being caught out. In this instance, James recalls, he and the rest of the Tunapuna crowd felt themselves “lifted to the heights and cast down into the depths in much less than a fraction of a second” (James [1963] 1983, 17). Beginning from a physical cultural activity such as sport was thus important for the further reason that it informed James’s emphasis on the time-bound practices by which we consume culture. Watching the crowd “lifted” and “cast down” helps James see “consciously” and “clearly” how both “the object” and “our concepts of the object” change through their shifting interrelationship. To put it straightforwardly: the embodied and one-off quality of sporting play makes peculiarly explicit the historically situated nature of the processes by which cultural practices are made meaningful. James draws from this a more general lesson about the ways in which we make meaning of *all* kinds of culture, including literary texts. It is this insistence on the time-bound quality of cultural consumption that leads him to reject the idea that reading involves the search for a final meaning in fiction, as if “understanding” were a kind of aspic in which we might preserve the text. Hence, for example, his repudiation in *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* (James [1953] 1985) of “allegorical” interpretations of *Moby Dick* which treated Melville’s characters as ahistorical archetypes. Hence also his scepticism about the value of self-conscious modernist experimentation which, he believed, turned literature into a dreary puzzle, something to be “bagged” by intellectuals on what Michel De Certeau (1984) would later call the “private hunting reserves” of high culture (172). Novels like *Mrs Dalloway*, James writes, or *Ulysses*, “pose no problem which would immediately make the whole nation feel that it was involved” ([1955] 1992, 256).

It is worth noting again, here, the emphasis on “feeling”. As his reference to the “whole nation” implies, long before Benedict Anderson (1991) famously drew attention to the subjective and imagined aspects of national identity in *Imagined Communities*, James was paying attention to the ways in which the affective and somatic qualities of cultural reception might play a role in the formation of social and political community. Part of what art can achieve, as he argues in his essay on the “Artist in the Caribbean” (James [1959] 1980), is a change in how the audience feels about the world and its own orientation to that world. It has this potential not because it erects “identities” in the abstract – *Notes on Dialectics* had warned that “simple, abstract identity is a fiction, a deadly trap for thinkers” (James [1948] 1980a, 85) – but because it creates the conditions for a historical awareness, a congruence that comes not in the fixity of a term or a label, but in the feltness of a historical moment, in a happening. Art, James argued, thus had the potential to help a postcolonial Caribbean to feel itself as “a whole”. Yet art would do this not through a disquisition on identity or by forming the cultural equivalent of a manifesto, but by something more affective and immediate, by “shocking” us, James writes, into “recognition of what we are, and what we are not, with the power this will bring” ([1959] 1980, 189). James’s definition of “art” in this essay is, of course, deliberately capacious, encompassing film, painting, poetry, dance, cricket, calypso and fiction. It is precisely that refusal to honour the segregating boundaries of “high” and “low” culture that allowed him to throw off the models of “timeless” reception considered proper to elite or canonical forms.

At the same time, James was absolutely attuned to the reciprocity of the relationship between audience and cultural practice. He loved to spend time amongst cricket crowds, or watching the byplay between musicians and audiences in Trinidadian calypso tents or in the dance halls of New York. He was, for this reason, instinctively aware of the constitutive role that the audience plays in making culture meaningful. He was correspondingly concerned by the extent to which the political economy of cultural production in the colonial and postcolonial world might force West Indian writers and artists to work from overseas, or to address themselves primarily to a metropolitan audience. And he had, of course, his own struggle to publish *Beyond a Boundary* to reflect upon in this regard (see McCree, [forthcoming](#)). Hence, for example, in discussing the success of the dancer Beryl McBurnie, he notes the importance of the fact that her innovations, and the confidence which allowed her to extend the bounds of existing practice, had emerged from an implicit dialogue with “the scrutiny and responses of a national audience” (James [\[1959\] 1980](#), 188) in the Caribbean. In the same way, it was James’s awareness of the direct, dialectical relationship between the crowd and the player, the dancer or the musician in popular culture that led him to repudiate the romantic model of literary culture, of the isolated and self-sufficient poet or artist. Long before reception studies became a part of academic research, James was foregrounding the role of the audience in making possible, and making meaningful, cultural forms and practices of all kinds: if it was the artist who might “shock” the audience into recognition of themselves as a community, as a “we”, it was – by the same token – only that audience which could “create the conditions under which the artist can flourish” (189).

Contingencies

It is the fact that James’s cultural analysis takes seriously – in a sense, indeed, gives first place to – a popular sporting practice like cricket which, I have argued, leads him to recognize the affective and corporeal ways in which we respond to culture. This, in turn, informs his awareness of the time-bound nature of cultural consumption and helps explain why James continually emphasized the constitutive role of the audience in making culture sociologically and historically significant. A second consequence of James’s emphasis on popular sporting practice concerns the question of contingency. Cricket is, as has been noticed by various writers who have reflected on the sport, a game which is peculiarly open to a range of more or less arbitrary factors which can shape, occasionally in quite fateful ways, the outcome of events: the weather, the nature of the pitch, the state or quality of the ball, etc. The presence of these factors is absolutely central to what Ashis Nandy ([1989](#)), in an eloquent discussion, calls the game’s “moral universe” (106). Although Nandy writes fearfully of the extent to which that universe is being supplanted by a more stage-managed and commodified version of the sport, it is notable that even in elite contexts “doctoring” the pitch or “tampering” with the ball are still treated, not just as breaches of the game’s “law”, but of its implicit ethics. Nandy recognizes, just as James had done before him, that cricket is a “powerful projective device” (120); in other words, it has been a game in which communities have found or expressed some sense of themselves. This has been the case, particularly clearly, in the context of empire and resistance to empire. In India, no less than in the West Indies, “it was possible to actualize national sentiments [...] by literally beating the West at its own game” (106). Yet at the same time, the presence in cricket of factors which cannot be fully controlled by the players, the fact that its outcomes are not rationally determinable, mean

that it remains a game which can provide an “empirical lesson” (120), as Nandy puts it, in historical humility, in the relative openness of historical events.

James’s central concern in *Beyond a Boundary*, one reflected in his cultural writing more widely, is to read the game historically, to make sense of its dramas and trajectories as both shaped by, and expressive of, political contradictions and social longings at specific historical conjunctures. Nonetheless, James was profoundly sceptical of a reading of any kind of cultural practice which treated it as nothing more than an epiphenomenon of politics, or which treated its outcomes as prescribed by historical forces. He was, in this respect, consistent in his rejection of simplistic determinism. That nuanced position, it seems to me, James owes in no small part to his immersion in cricket’s “moral universe”, and the fact that the game never completely forecloses on contingency, so that it becomes, in Nandy’s words, “a game of doubt”, one that leaves open the awareness “of what might or should have been, or may still be” (1989, 120). In that respect, it is striking that James’s account of some of the game’s most well-recognized figures absolutely refuses to “read them off” against history in a straightforward, one-to-one or formulaic way, but interprets them, instead, in terms of their historical anachronism. In a short essay, for example, comparing the English batsman Ted Dexter with the great West Indian Garry Sobers, he talks about the former as a man who plays “against the very soul of the age” (James [1963] 1986, 128), someone frequently undone by the demand for “dependability” and “concentration” that characterized English cricket of the period and which James took as characteristic of the zeitgeist more generally. Dexter’s play is thus historical, *not* in the sense that it is a straightforward reflection of “the times”, but precisely because it is “out of time”, unfitting, because it objectifies the terms of a historical struggle: “he bears the stamp of a man in conflict with his age” (129), James says. This is, we might say, a *disjunctural* historical reading. Whilst we (rightly) think of James as a pioneering figure in historically orientated cultural criticism, his interpretive approach foregrounds the question of struggle, of what he calls in *Beyond a Boundary* the “waywardness” of creativity, of how artistic practices of all kinds may entail a wrestling with the world as it is, an attempt to exceed the limits of the expected or the possible. It is notable that other critics and thinkers from the colonial world have emphasized, similarly, the creative possibilities that can be wrested from the disjunctures thrown up by capitalism’s uneven but combined development: see, for example, Roberto Schwarz’s (1992) discussion of “misplaced ideas” (see also Larsen 2001, chap. 5). In James’s case, this emphasis on the waywardness of creativity is expressed also in his wider politics which, as his famous essay “Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity” demonstrates, foregrounded the relentless and unbounded popular struggle for “completeness” (James [1948] 1980b, 81), the drive to negate concrete obstacles to that completeness, as a key historical dynamic. For the same reason James became increasingly wary of the hold of inherited political understandings and organizational forms (see, inter alia, the discussions in *Facing Reality* [James, Lee, and Chaulieu (1958) 1974] and in *State Capitalism and World Revolution* [James, Lee, and Dunayevskaya [1986]]).

James brings those same “empirical lessons” from the contingencies of popular sport to his reading of literature and other forms of consecrated culture. We can see this, for example, in a review of two novels – one by Norman Mailer (*The Naked and the Dead*) and the other by William Gardner Smith (*The Last of the Conquerors*) – from 1950, which he published under the pseudonym G.F. Eckstein in *Fourth International*. The interpretive question that James foregrounds in his review is precisely the relationship between literary creativity and

the “the politics of our troubled times” (James [1950] 1980, 106). James’s reading emphasizes, in particular, the fact that Gardner Smith’s novel contains an awareness of the possibility of political resistance. It is that same possibility, he suggests, which is absent from – which forms the central aporia of – Mailer’s novel. An awareness of the “reality of revolt” (110), James claims, is necessarily a part of black experience in America. This history, therefore, grants to Gardner Smith a “perspective of freedom” which is absent for Mailer. Yet James is no less clear that Mailer’s novel is the more significant, more fully achieved work in literary terms. Indeed, he reads Mailer as the heir to Herman Melville precisely in his ability to bring to life the political contradictions of American society. In short, James’s interpretative approach to fiction is deeply concerned with understanding the ways in which literature is shaped by and responds to the political and social formations of the world from which it emerges. Although this is the case, his historicizing approach absolutely refuses to follow the path of what he derisively calls the Stalinist “‘stand and deliver theory’ of culture” (112), in which the writer becomes merely a passive conduit of a class perspective or the mouthpiece of some kind of historical necessity. Well before Pierre Macherey or Fredric Jameson, James was seeking a way of relating literature to history which focused not just on what literary texts did say, but on what they *did not* or *could not* (as in Mailer’s inability to find a compelling imaginative expression of rebellion), and which acknowledged the messy and uncertain articulations between individual backgrounds, literary creativity and historical context. Gardner Smith, James argues, can see a political possibility that Mailer cannot see, or at least can see that possibility with a greater urgency, but that does not make him a greater writer: “However much his work is the expression of social forces, an artist’s development is a very individual thing” (111). Art – a term which, for James, encompassed cricket as well as literature – is thus a matter of conscious “struggle”, not a kind of automata set working by political forces, and it is, moreover, a struggle contingent on a complex and intersecting series of factors including the artist’s own “personality and experiences”.

In summary, then, it seems to me that here again we can see that James’s approach to the reading and interpretation of “high” cultural forms such as literature – and, indeed, the anti-determinism characteristic of his politics more generally – is shaped in important ways by the “empirical lessons” he learned from popular culture; and in particular learned from cricket’s “game of doubt”, from his immersion in a cultural form all too obviously open to the contingencies of practice. A crassly determinist reading of cricketing play, after all, was always liable to have its bluff called by the uncertainties of that play itself. And James discusses such an overturning of cricketing expectation in his justly famous chapter in *Beyond a Boundary* on Wilton St Hill, the great Trinidadian batsman who failed disastrously on the West Indian tour of England in 1928. The upshot of all of this is that James develops a form of cultural materialism which prizes the particular kinds of historical meaningfulness and self-awareness made possible by human creativity, and the ability of such creativity to give us back some sense of ourselves and our times “at one remove”. He prizes that possibility all the more, however, for understanding it as something won through human struggle, rather than as a gift bestowed on the artist by the blind gods of history.

Everyone can judge

A final point is, I think, implicit in what I have just described. The historicizing or sociological reading of culture can sometimes descend into a form of radical relativism. It is absolutely

true, of course, that the stories and representations which literature or art furnish us with may help to legitimate or make unremarkable the injustices of the social world. Postcolonial literary criticism has been centrally concerned with this fact, and with the recognition, following Edward Said, that cultural representations have a more than merely representative quality, that they are in certain respects *constitutive* of our sense of the world. Underlying this recognition is Foucault's epoch-making discussion of the complicity of knowledge with power, and his corresponding scepticism about the liberating potential of human creativity or imagination; "creativity", in Foucault's account, is only ever the "putting into play [of] a system of rules" (Chomsky and Foucault 2006, 29) such that creative expression is always already organized by the epistemological or epistemic "grid" which governs what can be said or done. From this perspective, evaluative judgements with regard to cultural practices become profoundly suspicious, always political in themselves. There is every good reason for this suspicion. Even before the full-blown emergence of postcolonial studies, we might recall, there was a fiercely critical response to "Commonwealth" literary criticism from a number of African writers who pointed out that one did not have to scratch the surface of that criticism very hard before one uncovered a range of essentially a priori assumptions about what non-European writers should be trying to achieve (see, inter alia, Achebe 1975; Abrahams 1981; Nwoga 1976). As Cecil Abrahams pointed out, in that context, beneath claims of a "comparative aesthetics", European critical responses to African writing frequently did little more than assert the universal validity of their own normative judgements.

James was more than aware of the ways in which the political impinged on the cultural. His discussion in *Beyond a Boundary* makes this clear in numerous places and most famously in his account of – and campaign against – the continued refusal of the West Indian cricketing authorities to appoint a black captain for the Test side. James was utterly clear-sighted about the symbolic violence that was being played out in this decision, and what that process suggested about the ways in which the powerful will seek to manipulate cultural practices to their own ends. The "whole point" of this practice, he noted, was that it meant that the West Indies would

continue to send to populations of white people, black or brown men under a white captain. The more brilliantly the black men played, the more it would emphasize to millions of English people: "Yes, they are fine players, but, funny, isn't it, they cannot be responsible for themselves – they must always have a white man to lead them." (James [1963] 1983, 225)

James's response to this, though, was not to fall into a relativism in which critical assessment was abandoned as nothing more than politics-by-other-means or in which such judgements became merely a question of whose "interpretations [have] sufficiently powerful sponsors to back them up" (Tallis 2011, 62). Instead, James's campaign to have the great Bajan batsman Frank Worrell instated as West Indian captain rested precisely on his insistence that it *was* possible to determine who was a better or worse player on the cricket pitch, a better or worse captain (in this case, Worrell, or the board's white appointee, Gerry Alexander). James insisted on the sufficiency of a judgment made in terms of cricket's own particular world of meaning. "My argument was simply this", he writes, "there was not the slightest shadow of justification for Alexander to be a captain of a side in which Frank Worrell was playing" (James [1963] 1983, 224). Moreover, James made that claim confident in the fact that the wider, popular cricketing community in the West Indies would arrive at the same conclusion: "In cricket these sentiments are at their most acute because everyone can see and can judge" (225).

Everyone can judge. Sporting practices make this especially clear because sport comes with evaluative judgements – with assessments about better or worse – “built in”, as it were. Some players prove to be better cricketers than others, some succeed better at the particular disciplines of the game than others. Although there may be arguments about who plays the game most stylishly or most beautifully, a judgement about who does it *best* emerges from within the play itself. For this reason, a popular practice like cricket gives the lie to a view which refuses to talk about better or worse in regard to culture, or which sees such judgements as only and inevitably the expression of power. Indeed, for James, the possibility of what we might call “cricketing truth” was exactly what it meant, that sporting practices could force the acts of the powerful into the open. It was *because* it was possible to say that Worrell was a better cricketer than Alexander that the decision to deny the former the captaincy made apparent – in a way that “everyone could see” – the political manipulation of the sport. Sporting practice, although it certainly involved submission to the game’s own arbitrary set of rules, nevertheless sustained the conditions for a certain kind of symbolic “speech” which could exceed or unsettle the epistemological grid which governed colonial society. In just the same way, writing about Joe Louis, James noted that Louis’s retention of his heavyweight champion’s title in 1946 gave to black Americans a way of saying the very thing which American racism sought to make unsayable: “Negroes are inferior? Very well then. Here is one Negro who is not inferior and beats everybody who dares to challenge him” (James [1946] 1996, 60).

Critical evaluation is thus irreducible for James because it was irreducible in popular sport, because the particular symbolic worlds of sport simply cannot be thought about, sociologically speaking, without taking into account the “better” or “worse” which is generated in and through sporting practices themselves. It is no surprise, in this respect, that James insisted on the necessity of such evaluation in trying to make sense of the politics of *all* forms of culture, even those which are most sacred or canonical in the western tradition. Against the tendency to assume that artistic quality was something which could be identified or ratified only by the well read and well bred, James summons up the ghosts of a distant crowd. “How educated were the Greeks who shouted and stamped and gave Aeschylus the prize thirteen times?” he writes to Daniel Bell in 1953. “I cannot begin to believe that the future of art rests with the masses of people learning to appreciate art in the terms that intellectuals understand this today” ([1953] 1992, 227–228). Professional cultural criticism takes for itself, it encloses as its own, the popular capacity for artistic judgement. And it is that capacity which, for James, was central to understanding how any creative practice comes to matter, historically speaking. Aeschylus or Shakespeare were great artists, he goes on to argue, not because they have been rescued into eternity by elite critics but because they found ways of expressing the contradictions and longings and frustrations which their contemporary audiences brought with them to the drama. Evaluative judgement is, thus, an index of the popular audience’s grappling with its own historical situation.

In the course of the same letter to Bell he reiterates the point: “The Athenian masses, many of whom I suppose were illiterate, stamped and shouted and booed and carried on as much as the masses of people in New York do at Ebbets Field or the Yankee Stadium” (James [1953] 1992, 221). Here in conclusion, then, we see again that “thinking across” which so profoundly characterizes James’s cultural criticism, and which – as I’ve sought to demonstrate – lies at the root of many of the most original and insightful elements of his critical approach. James understood the literary text and the sports pitch, Greek tragedy

and Ebbets Field, as part of the same thing. It was that understanding which led him to insist that there *is* “better” and “worse” in literature, just as there is in boxing or cricket or baseball, but to insist no less that this judgement belongs to the stamping, shouting crowd and not to a small coterie of “those who know”.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Claire Westall and the *JPW* anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments and suggestions with regard to this essay.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK under [grant number ES/K002198/1].

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